

## i'll bow for your king when he shows himself by eternalgoldfish

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**Summary:**

These days Billy remembers rushing waters and harsh waves, the slap of the ocean against his thighs as his surfboard tipped and his mouth filled with brine. God was in the waves and in the clouds. He spoke to Billy as the press of the ocean, the salt in his lungs. The sacrament of drowning.

He remembers sizzling heat and sand, and knows the rocks at Lover's Lake are a sad comparison. When he opens his eyes there will be no surf and no boardwalk. The path behind him will be bracketed by dense Indiana trees and twisting roots, older than time, filled with feelings too lost for the help of St. Anthony.

Steve skips a rock along the water and it jumps with plucking splashes, before it lands with a harsh *glump* as it's swallowed by the deeps. Billy didn't hear Steve's feet crunching on the rocks, doesn't open his eyes to check.

“Rough day?” Steve asks, and Billy sighs into the ground.

## **i'll bow for your king when he shows himself**

Billy had a God, once.

His family was never religious. His mother owned a rosary, but it was an heirloom, an old forgotten relic left by a grandmother or great aunt. Billy had never asked, but he'd stared at it where it hung in his mother's glass jewelry box, as if parse its secrets through divine gifts.

When his mother moved out, he stole the rosary and hid it in his backpack. He was thirteen and spent his summers soaked in sun, hiding on the hot beaches until the skies above rippled orange. He wanted to burn up into the clouds and sink into the earth with the salt. He clutched hot sand in his hands until the grit got deep under his nails and he wondered what he had done.

Why had she left him?

He'd hold her rosary with sand in his swim trunks and run his fingers over the beads like he'd seen in movies. He didn't know a single prayer, but he liked the weight of the words on his tongue, the idea that he could own something reverent. He was thirteen, but he'd already grasped intangibility. He held the things he didn't understand between sunburnt palms.

When the water was right, he'd use money he collected along the beach to rent surfboards. The guy who worked at the kiosk was pimply, probably sixteen, and didn't ask when the deposit was put down in nickels, dimes and chewing gum. Billy looked older than thirteen, even with his long hair and boyish cheeks.

Billy would paddle with his belly to the wood without a rash guard, unafraid of harsh waves or sun stroke. He'd wait with his cheek pressed against the varnish and his eyes level with the waters. There was something beautiful about the deep. Something gorgeously monstrous. When he closed his eyes he could feel the heat searing his back and melting down his shoulders to where his arms dipped into the water, his body the weightiest thing in the universe. A celestial

anvil. A collapsed star.

When the right wave came he'd scramble to his feet, always ready at the moment he could lose the wave with a blink. For thirty-six seconds, the wind would whip past his burnt skin like a sudden balm. Then the ocean would rip the wood out from under his toes and swallow him like a whale.

Billy always wishes his father grew mean when his mother packed her bags, but it's frivolous, optimistic. He thinks maybe if he had a happy childhood, could pinpoint the moment it went south, he could see the logic in his father's stern hands and tight smiles, could see when someone else morphed into his father. But Neil Hargrove has been Neil Hargrove for the entire stretch of Billy's natural life, and imagination does little for Billy when he's seventeen and lying on the shores of Lover's Lake in Hawkins, Indiana, with scars on his hands and blood dripping from his busted shins.

The rocks pressing into his back are hot like coals, gunky and covered in algae, jagged like smashed marbles where they press into his bruised skin. He sinks into the heat and thinks of the sea, thinks the fat clouds rolling above look like drunk whales, and wishes he had rum.

There are no seashells in Indiana. No rolling waves. This beach is the closest thing to sandy shores in this whole goddamn landlocked hell-town, the only place with water where he can lie shirtless under the sizzling sun and pretend the softly shifting water smells like the ocean.

He holds his knuckles over St. Anthony, strung on a pendant around his neck like a prayer, and remembers the pawn shop he pinched it from when he was fifteen and bitter. He didn't know what it meant, just that the smiling face and open palms reminded him of his mother.

He closes his eyes, feels the heat on his mottled chest, and wishes he had rum.

The day Billy's mother left, Billy's father drank an entire bottle of whisky, slowly pouring it over the same twelve ice cubes until all that was left in his glass were rolling drops. Billy had stayed silent in the kitchen as he'd cooked dinner, eyes occasionally peering around the doorway to see if his dad was still awake.

Cooking was *unmanly* , but Billy had been young and his mother had been right, knowing how to cook could save his life, because she had worked nights and Neil Hargrove was a busy man. He wasn't cooking for anyone, but he damn well better be fed.

Billy had tried to keep his tears to himself as he stirred whatever canned muck he'd poured into the pot on the stove, hopefully soup, and prayed his father didn't mind grilled cheese. He couldn't name saints, but he'd learned how to create his own.

He cut bread and lathered the outsides with butter, layering them on a plate butter-side to butter-side as onions and broccoli hissed and popped next to the soup. His mother always said he needed vegetables to be strong, said her strength came from all the vegetables. If she had been so strong, why had she left? She had only been hit once.

Feeling brave, he dropped both sandwiches in the pan at the same time. Maybe her absence was temporary. Maybe it was just one of those things she needed, like yoga classes or that time she went to visit her uncle in Canada without saying goodbye. Even if she came back, his father was half way to throwing out the things she'd left. He'd stopped for the whisky and gotten sucked in by Wheel of Fortune.

Billy put their food on plates and set his on the kitchen table before taking his father's out to the living room. He was never allowed to eat in front of the TV, but his father had repurposed an old milk crate as his dinner table years ago. Stale, forgotten beer bottles covered the entire surface and Billy, clumsy and thirteen, had to navigate soup and a sandwich in between the glass before he could scoop up as many bottles as he could carry.

He made it as far as the kitchen before the first bottle slipped between his thumb and forefinger, the second dropping when he startled at the singing glass. He stood still as a scarecrow in the middle of his kitchen, tracing the crop circles of shards surrounding his feet on the matte pink tiles.

His father had thundered into the kitchen with whisky sloshing out of his glass and poison on his mouth. "What the fuck are you doing?" He growled, and Billy's slack jaw had stuttered. He was thirteen, he hadn't learned how to shelter his heart or spit venom from his mouth.

"Pick it up," his father said. Every inch of the floor around Billy was glass, slivers and chunks sprayed so wide that there was no way his skinny arms could reach the broom propped against the pantry or grab a cloth from the sink. "What the fuck are you waiting for?" He father asked. "Pick it the fuck up."

With shaking hands, Billy had bent at the waist to pick up the first piece, then the second, then the third. When the sixth bit into his hand, he sucked in a sharp breath, but decidedly do not yelp. He grit his teeth and held his tears as he picked up the next and the next, droplets of blood splattering the grout between tiles as he worked. That would be his next job, he knew, scrubbing the floor with scalding water and soap in his wounds.

He had thought of the rosary in his backpack and imagined the drops of blood as beads, each one a prayer.

"Put out the trash when you're done," His father had said, "I can't stand that bitch's shitty perfume."

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"Rough day?" Steve asks, and Billy sighs into the ground.

"Fucking understatement."

"You should have just stayed at my place," Steve says, and Billy can practically hear his shrug. He knows Steve is looking for another stone. Now that he knows what to listen for, he can hear Steve's shuffling feet grinding the rocks together.

"He'd have come looking eventually," Billy says.

"I wouldn't have let him into my house."

Billy finally opens his eyes to watch Steve stumble along the water's edge, smooth flat stones clutched between his hands. He licks his chapped lips and says, "You wouldn't have had a choice. He fucking hates you, you know."

Steve grimaces and throws his next rock, doesn't speak until it stops hopping across the water's surface. "We're discreet."

"He doesn't care if we're discreet, he cares that you exist."

Steve seems to roll that idea around, although Billy knows he has a thousand times. It's the weight in the room when they kiss, the lead blanket on their chests when they curl naked under Steve's sheets.

"So, what can I do about it?" Steve asks.

"Nothing," Billy says. He's tried lots of things, over the years. He's tried being respectful. He's tried being responsible. He's tried being repentant. "He'll treat us like shit anyway. No point getting excited."

The tiles in their house in Hawkins, Indiana, are beige and covered with blocky brown flowers. Susan says they're *retro*. Billy says they're fucking ugly, but no one has let him buy new furniture or paint a wall since he was thirteen, so maybe he's not the best judge of home décor. He likes his milkcrate vanity, likes the mirror he found in a pawn shop back in California when he was fourteen, but knows hoarding things and propping them together is less about style and more about survival. Look at his house. Look at his family.

Billy is standing on those beige tiles, stirring a pot of soup he mashed from squash and spices, when his father comes home with a new gleam in his eye. "Heard you were at the café with that Harrington boy again," Neil says, setting his briefcase on the kitchen table.

Billy shrugs and throws some pepper into the pot. Max likes peppery food. Billy secretly does too. "We're thinking about joining the baseball league this summer," he says, almost pretending that's an answer. "A bunch of the guys from the team are, actually. A good way to spend our last summer before we all go off to college."

"I thought I told you to stay away from him."

The steel in Neil's words still raises Billy's shoulders to his ears, tangles his intestines like a rosary jangling around in the bottom of a backpack, but he's used to the feeling. He's lived with this ache in his gut for so long that he can't remember when he swallowed it. So he says, "There's a rec league for old guys too, if you're interested. I think Steve's dad plays sometimes. And Chief Hopper."

"Oh, so you want me to be *buddies* with Steve's dad?" Neil asks, and Billy can hear his teeth click together at the end. "Let me ask you, have you just never learned English? Have I been raising an idiot this whole time?"

Billy shrugs, ignores that last part. "It's a small town. Might as well get to know some people."

"Listen," Billy's dad says, and suddenly he's turning Billy around by the shoulder, pressing him fast against the stove. His face is pinched



and red as he stabs a finger into Billy's cheek, like maybe he can jab the words into his skin. "You may know every whore and fag in this town, but they don't need to know us, you understand? I don't need you spreading your filthy around to the rest of them. We're a respectable family."

The lip of the pot digs into Billy's back, hot as a brand, but he refuses to wiggle, keeps his eyes wide and glued to his father's nose. "Yes sir," he says. The pot burns a line across his back, through his t-shirt. "I'll tell them you have a wife."

"That all?" Neil asks, shoves Billy back enough that the pot hops off the element, Billy's elbow meeting the coils instead. He hisses, flails, and accidentally hits his father in the jaw.

"Yeah, shit, let me go," Billy says. He thinks of the sun on his back. Wonders whatever happened to that old rosary. "I get it. Dinner's almost ready. Christ."

Neil's face is nearly purple as he grabs at his jaw. Billy can see his misstep clear, can hear Susan opening the front door and setting groceries down by the shoe rack. "Boys?" she calls.

"In the kitchen," Neil says, but he's grabbing Billy by the elbow and hauling him to the back door. "We just need to pop into the cellar. I think we still have some of those raspberry preserves left from California. Can you watch the stove?"

"Of course," Susan says, followed by the rustle of grocery bags.

Billy thinks Susan knows what happens in her cellar, thinks she's a smart woman, like his mother. She has the same delicate hands and charming crow's feet. When she asks Billy to drive Max to school or set the table, or pick up butter from Bradley's Big Buy, he listens because he is respectful and responsible. She has kind eyes and a crucifix embroidered into a pillow for her by a great aunt.

But when Billy's father has him pinned against the metal shelves in the basement, boxes of soda crackers pressed into his spine, he doesn't think of her. He doesn't think of her crucifix. He's too old to count drops of blood like prayer beads, slipping through his teeth too

fast to taste the reverence on his tongue.

“You don’t speak to me like that,” His father says, one hand around his neck while the hanging bulb above them flickers. “You show respect in my house. I’ve been patient with you lately. *Considerate.* ”

And Billy knows his father knows what happens when he’s not around, knows his father is a smart man. “I know, sir,” he says, but it’s not a prayer. “I’m sorry.”

The soup is cold by the time Billy slinks back in to grab some, fingers shaky and purple as he stuffs his bowl into the microwave. They never did look for those preserves. He’s pretty sure they all got left in California.

Steve finds him again. This time, Billy hears his feet crunching over the gravel first, then the way he hisses when he sees a new lash crawling across Billy’s back. Billy’s got his face in the jagged rocks, all the harsh edges pressing into his belly, cauterizing his wounds. The sun presses into the burn on his back and makes it molten.

“What was it this time?” he asks, and Billy shrugs. He’s not sure, in retrospect.

“Something about you,” he offers. “Or he thinks baseball is offensive. I might have called him old.”

Today, Steve doesn’t pace. He turns twice on the hot rocks before taking a seat with his knee just shy of Billy’s neck, touches the first knot on Billy’s spine. Steve’s hands are warm and slightly chapped, covered in calluses from years of basketball and playing in forests. Billy rolls under their feather weight until his head is cradled in Steve’s lap.

Sometimes they just sit like this for hours. When Steve runs his fingers through Billy’s hair as he rests against the sharp, hot rocks, bruises dug to his bones like stones to dirt, he thinks of rising waters and sun showers. Surf soaked hair and open months.

He’s baptized by Steve’s sun hands.

He clasps his fingers over St. Anthony and looks past Steve's fringe to the fat clouds rolling overhead, wonders how long he could walk in the woods, searching for a little boy made of sun.

Steve kisses him softly and runs a thumb over his temple. He asks, "Is this my fault?"

And Billy's seventeen, has held Steve between sunburnt palms, knows how to grasp intangibility. He tangles a hand in Steve's hair, says, "Nah, it was going to happen anyway."

### **Author's Note:**

Heyyy, soo, I know this is kind of weird, but I had the strongest compulsion to make it happen, so hope you enjoyed reading.

Special thanks to Demogrove for being a babe, supporting me, and editing.

The title is from "House of Wolves" by Bring Me The Horizon.

As always, I'd love to hear what you have to think. Comments are loved, and feel free to hit me up @eternalgoldfish on tumblr. I'm really very friendly, I swear.